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WHY STUDY LATIN ?¹

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The past twenty-five years have wrought marvels in the world of material things. In a period of so rapid development there has naturally been a reaction upon thought, and inevitably much that is good has been attacked as if out of date, along with much that reflects anachronism. Hence in recent years lovers of Latin have had to endure many a bitter assault from educational faddists, business men, and devotees of science, from those devoted to the new subjects, and brilliant publicists, as well as from men of the street.

Desiring to have some unhackneyed data to present today, I wrote to the Latin teachers of some of the larger schools in Michigan requesting them to ask at least fifty of their pupils why they were studying Latin. I requested them to exclude from their statements such reasons as the desire of parents, school credit, and college credit. Of the many replies, 276 said that Latin helped the writers in their English; 208, that it helped them with the other languages; 103, that it was a help in training the mind; 93, that it would help them in their professional work; and 64 declared that they were studying Latin because it was interesting. There were also 56 who assigned help in other studies as their reason for studying Latin.

The other reasons given may be ignored. The information thus briefly conveyed by the statistics is suggestive and probably typical. Apparently the chief value of Latin, in the view of students generally, is the help it affords in the comprehension of English.

I wrote also to several colleges and universities asking if the percentage of Latin students had decreased in the last ten years, and why. A few replies may be briefly summarized here. At the University of Wisconsin there has been a decrease of from 50 per cent to 60 per cent "due to vocationalism, promiscuous attendance, and relaxation of intellectual ideals." At Cornell there has

¹ Read at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Michigan, April 2, 1919.

been no great decrease. At Princeton, the home of classic ideals and tradition, there has been slight change; about 90 per cent of the students in the Freshman year have been taking Latin, and the percentage has been consistent through the ten years.

At Dartmouth there has been a decrease of 20 per cent; "Latin is too difficult for most students of the present generation. Teaching methods advocated by superintendents and others are not producing good results." From the University of Texas comes a plaint against the iconoclasm of commercialism; in ten years there has been a decrease of 20 per cent. A similar decrease is reported by Yale.

I sent letters to a number of successful doctors and lawyers asking them if the study of Latin had proved to be worth while. All said "Yes," but one declared that Latin had been "crammed down the throats" of pupils without any regard to their capabilities.

I wrote, finally, to a number of men of the class of 1893 at the University of Michigan. These were not engaged in professional work, and so their replies are of especial interest. Four of these letters, slightly reduced in length, are printed here.

Letter I. From an Advertising Agent:

[The writer had only a limited amount of Latin, perhaps two years in all, and rather regrets that he had so little, as, aside from the possible mental training, the knowledge of the language as a source for the derivation of English words has always stood him in good stead and has frequently been of special service to him as a newspaper writer and reader—not to mention the enlarging of his vocabulary when he was a student.]

I am not strong for any other of the dead languages but I would say that Latin, because of its relation not only to many English words but likewise to French and Spanish, is worth studying for a limited period. The help of Latin to me, however, may be said to have been more because of the literary value, something possibly not appealing to every student; still, as with mathematics, the mental training is worth while to anybody.

Letter II. From a Chicago Journalist:

Replying to your favor of February 18th, I beg to say that I studied Latin for about two years in preparatory schools. Then I had Latin courses running in all approximately three years at Michigan University. While I realize now that I got far less out of it than I should have got—and through no fault of the teachers at the University—I'm convinced that what I did learn was invaluable to me, principally as a means of getting at the real significance of words in our language. I suppose this would be set down as the "philological" value of the study.

I may add that through the fault of my own lack of application the Latin as a *literature* never became to me the living thing it should have been. Translation and construction were always difficult, awkward and crude, and left me without an appreciation of the graces and beauties of the language. In spite of that, the insight I obtained into the origin and significance of words has been of great use in all my work.

Letter III. From the President of a Wholesale Millinery House:

I feel that the study of Latin is worth while because it trains one to think and study effectively. Also it enables one to understand the real meaning and force of English words, knowing what the Latin word it was derived from originally meant. The study of Latin also enables us to at times almost read the Latin languages of today—so many words are similar—without having devoted any special study to them. Certainly it would make the study of those languages today very much easier.

I know it would be impossible to concentrate on any one study as far as high school students are concerned, but my experience during the time of my education leads me to think that if a pupil devoted more time to any one study he would get along better—as for instance in my case. I was probably the worst Latin pupil that ever attended the Detroit High School. I stuck to the ninth grade for two years in Latin after my fellows had passed me by a year. That was probably largely my fault because I did not study or know how to study. After all my classmates had gone to College two years ahead of me, I turned in and devoted three or four months to the study of Latin without any assistance, and when I got through I knew as much of the technicalities of the language as probably any student that ever went out of the high school. The same thing with the mathematics in high school. I think it took me about three weeks to clean up two years, devoting all my time to it and nothing else. I remember I went about with a text book in my hand, whether on a Sunday School picnic or at the theatre.

The brief period of a few minutes a day that a pupil devotes to each one of the five or six studies in the high school as a rule does not seem to fasten attention or arouse interest in a study. Of course there are exceptions, but there are lots of students going along the same way I did who, if their minds could be directed in one channel for a while, would acquire an interest and understanding in some one course.

Letter IV. From a Life Insurance Agent:

I studied Latin for the usual course in high school and for two years in college, probably five years at least in all.

Yes, I feel that it was worth while, but am not sure that the time might not have been better spent otherwise, if proper teachers and equipment had been available.

Latin can be tolerably well taught with poorer instructors, and less equipment, than can most content subjects. Many schools could not provide suitable instruction for such subjects, and yet can do fairly good work in Latin.

In 1870 the German government asked the University of Berlin to consider the admission of graduates of the Realschule to the university on equal terms with those of the Gymnasium, whose training is based largely on the classics, indicating in this request that the Realschule afforded an equivalent preparation for advanced study. The philosophical faculty replied that the non-classical training is incapable of furnishing a preparation for academic studies equal to that afforded by classical training; that all efforts to find a substitute for the classical languages, whether in mathematics or in the modern languages or in the natural sciences, have hitherto been unsuccessful; that after long and vain search we must come back finally to the result of centuries of experience; that the surest instrument that can be used in the training of the minds of the youth is given to us in the languages, the literature, and the works of art of classical antiquity.

In spite of this, the government opened up the universities to the graduates of these technical high schools. After ten years of experimenting, the entire faculty, professors of natural and physical sciences included, declared that in spite of the start gained in scientific study by the graduates of the technical schools, they were speedily overtaken by the graduates of the classical institutions and left in the rear. The entire faculty petitioned the government to repeal its decree and to admit to the university only such students as had received the training of the classics as the only adequate training for university study. On this petition were the names of Liebig, Helmholtz, Hoffmann, Rammelsberg, Mommsen, Curtius, and others of equal fame.

When Johnny in his reading comes across the word "prediction" and is able to tell its origin and probably its meaning, even though partly from context, there is joy in his heart; and when I meet the word "ancillary" for the first time I have a bit of his pleasure, as one does who hears a new bird or finds a new flower. True, this experience probably never has nor ever will have a cash value, yet I am better for it, and life is more worth living. He who becomes better acquainted with his own language through his knowledge of Latin learns to discriminate in his word-judgments, becomes familiar with the niceties of speech, and has a possession worth more than houses and lots.